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Practice makes perfect: Tham Horng Kent plans to get a lecturing job after his graduation. If that does not work out, then he will return to his hometown of Keningau in Sabah, and teach music to the locals.

Young music makers



Stories by YAM PHUI YEE
yam@thestar.com.my

THAM Horng Kent used to wait for everyone to leave the church after Sunday service so he could tinker on the ivory keys of the piano. The music he played would lift him into his own world, until he was brought back to reality by the church caretaker asking him to leave.

It wasn't until he was 15 that his father considered buying him a piano. Initially, Kent was hesitant, fully aware at how much this purchase would cost his family.

"I said no because it was so expensive. Anything more than RM2,000 is very expensive to any Sabahan and the piano cost RM8,000. It was unthinkable," recalled Kent, who grew up in Keningau, Sabah. His father bought it for him, anyway.

Back then, he took lessons from an Indonesian pastor who travels to the different towns in Sabah to teach piano every week. When she arrived in Keningau, she rented a piano from a family and conducted lessons at her new home.

Kent developed his talent as a performer by playing as an accompanist in the children's choirs organised by his teacher.

He has always loved music, and knew his life would revolve around it.

"Since I was in Form Two, if a song was very attractive to me, I would take a two-hour bus ride alone to Kota Kinabalu to buy books and CDs about the composer," says Kent, a music student at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

Kent and his family went through great lengths to ensure that he could pursue music.

Young people are prepared to face, and overcome, the barriers to pursuing their love – music.

The same can be said for many of his classmates, although each of their stories is different.

In an ideal situation, Connie Ngan from Bahau, Negri Sembilan, would already be graduating. Unfortunately, her family could not afford to send her to a private college to study music so she spent two extra years in secondary school in Form Six. "My family is not rich so we couldn't afford private college studies. (But) I switched from the Science to the Arts stream in Form Six, so it wasn't

that bad," the 22-year-old student says. Even then, that was not good enough to get her a place in the music course at UPM.

"I didn't really enjoy Form Six. My results were not really good but based on the audition, I qualified for this course."

Studies aside, there could be other obstacles that a young person wanting to pursue a career in arts may face. For Liyana Anwar Tajuddin, it was parental consent. The 16-year-old plays the violin but plans to study psychology instead. One of the factors is that her father, Anwar Tajuddin Abdul Wahab, is not keen on the idea of his daughter playing music for a living.

Liyana is classically trained, and used to perform in school and compose songs for competitions.

"I'm a traditional man. I won't encourage her because, in our country, the job of a musician is not secure. But I encourage her to play on the side since she is interested," he said.

Connie's parents too do not think she will make much money pursuing a music course, but she has the support of her friends. When she was accepted into UPM, her friends rejoiced. Her parents however were less enthusiastic although they allow her to do what she loves.

"Sometimes I wish that my parents were more supportive. But they did say that if I've chosen this path, they will support me," she explained.

However, the problems do not disappear once these talented youths are accepted into the course and start studying music. Other obstacles appear, a major one being their hectic lifestyle.

UPM music student Choong Aik Hui says that she is in the university from morning till night.

"Since some of our lecturers are from outside the university, we can only have classes with them at night. Besides that, we eat, sleep and practise here. I practise at least two hours a day;



Connie Ngan (left) and Choong Aik Hui are hopeful of securing jobs in the music industry.

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WARM, inviting and magnificent sounds were coming from the room where the Youth Symphony Orchestra (OSR) was hard at practice. But inside the room, the atmosphere was tense as OSR members tried to tackle a difficult piece. Conductor Mayya Musaeva coaxed them to play a "bigger sound".

"Is this all you can give me? You are too stingy. I have to see smoke coming out from your violins," said Mayya.

Her young charges laughed, then played a powerful *fortissimo* passage; this time, the conductor approved. The musicians, aged 12 to 25, were attending the four-day OSR Music Camp. For the first time this year, new players had to audition to join the annual camp organised by Istana Budaya.

The music industry in Malaysia has been booming over the past few years. The rise of popular pop and rock bands have ensured that local musicians are getting the respect they deserve, and more jobs are available behind the scenes.

There was a time when many people – especially parents – were worried about what the future holds for their children if they were to pursue music. These days, there are lots of opportunities, including more courses available at tertiary level, as well as events such as the OSR Music Camp. The music-loving youths, on their part, are embracing these opportunities.

"I really wanted to join OSR because I wanted to meet new friends and play in a

Opportunities in orchestra



Adilah Mohamed Yusof (left) looks out for opportunities to expand her musical turf by playing in Istana Budaya's Youth Symphony Orchestra.

Musaeva admitted that the orchestra cannot be compared to the new Malaysian Youth Philharmonic Orchestra (MYPO) with *crème de la crème* players. Instead, OSR provides young working adults and players with the experience and joy of making music together.

It hopes to instil a deeper love for music in these youths that goes beyond just practising for their music examinations.

"Not every orchestra must be an MYPO but everyone deserves an opportunity. We must create that opportunity, it's our responsibility," she said.

Wong Sue-Zanne was the youngest among the players and she was having fun in the orchestra.

"Miss Mayya is strict

so we have to play better. The pieces are difficult, though, but I have friends to help me," said the shy 12-year-old who has been playing in OSR for a year.

Adilah Mohamed Yusof, 22, from Johor Baru, wanted to be a professional violinist after 11 years of learning violin and performing with the Yayasan Warisan Johor Orchestra. During her short stint with the OSR, she pushed herself to pay attention to the finer details of her playing. When the campers were dismissed for the day, she continued practising at home for the next day's rehearsal.

"I hope to work with Istana Budaya. I want to pursue this dream further and travel more," said Adilah.

The orchestra is a good place for aspiring musicians to learn and network with professional musicians who tutor at the camp.

different environment," said oboist Mohamad Khairul Ridzuan, 19.

National Symphony Orchestra manager Borhan Nawawi said that the camp was designed to expose players to an orchestral setting and cultivate discipline in musicians, which is an integral part of professional musicianship. Those with good performance at the camp could also be invited to join as OSR members in the future.

Under the baton of conductors Musaeva and Dr Takahisa Ota, the players performed for their family and friends at the end of the camp, playing pieces by Beethoven, Grieg, Schubert and Sibelius.

"One person can't create a big sound but together, in an orchestra, you can create something big and beautiful that can touch people's heart," said Musaeva, who hails from Uzbekistan and has been in Malaysia for 11 years.



Wong Sue-Zanne finds some pieces difficult but still she enjoys playing in an orchestra setting.

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more when I feel guilty," says Aik Hui, chuckling.

The 21-year-old student from Bidar, Perak, also worries about her career prospects now that she has enrolled in the music course. She is not confident of her piano performance skills although that is her instrument of choice. She is considering being a violinist or dabbling in music technology in Thailand.

For a music student, it is never too early to think about career prospects. Even Kent's father thinks about it.

The grocer has forked out a fortune to support his son's dream of becoming a musician, and he often wonders what will become of his son after he graduates.

"My parents ask me what I can do after studying music. There's still a cultural problem (in their mindset). I plan to be a piano lecturer in university," Kent shares.

Most musicians in Malaysia, especially those who are classically trained, teach music to earn a stable income.

But for someone like Connie, teaching is not at all in her radar.

"I know teaching can earn me a lot of money but I don't want to teach. What else can I do here? I'm learning jazz piano now and I hope to be a jazz pianist probably in Japan or in the US," she says.

Besides performing, there are other possibilities for young musicians to look into, more so now that the local music scene appears to be expanding.

UPM acting head of music department Dr

A brighter future



Liyana Anwar Tajuddin is a talented violinist who plans to study psychology.

Chan Cheong-Jan points out that graduates of the department have ventured into different music-related jobs locally and abroad. Among them are music teachers, music school principals, performers, music scientists, ring tone

composers, sound engineers, and choir and brass band trainers.

"There may be more jobs overseas but there are more trained musicians there as well. It's more competitive abroad.

Comparatively, capable musicians can climb up to prominent positions more easily in Malaysia," Dr Chan said.

In the 90s, there were only the then Institut Teknologi Mara and Malaysian Institute of Art offering music courses at tertiary level. A lot has changed since and students can now opt to study in many other public universities as well as private institutions.

From an educator's perspective, Dr Chan says that the music and music education industry is growing rapidly here and students have to be versatile, open-minded and creative in applying their musical skills. These include teaching, arranging, conducting and performing songs from different genres like classical, oldies and jazz.

"Determination and the spirit to explore new things are very important for local music musicians to survive. Overseas, there are many 'shoes' in music for you to choose to go into, you just have to concentrate.

"But in Malaysia, only those who would invent their own 'shoes' will find their work exciting. Those who are looking for existing 'shoes' to wear will become disappointed," says Dr Chan.

Kent already has a back-up plan if he can't get a lecturing job. He wants to return to Keningau and teach music to the locals, especially poor Kadazan children. Many of these kids have a natural musical sense, he says, attributing it to the Sumazau festivals where they play gongs together.

Music is part of their life and it will be a waste if these children were not given the opportunity to develop their talents.